

Lawrence Markey, Inc.

311 Sixth Street San Antonio TX 78215-1802 Tel 210.228.9966 Fax 210.228.9968 info@lawrencemarkey.com

ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 2000

ACHARAYA VYAKUL

LAWRENCE MARKEY

It would be a mistake to read Acharaya Vyakul's luminous work as naive or folksy. Vyakul, who died in May at sixty-nine, was no "outsider"; he was a tantric scholar and Sanskritist, a learned and avid collector of devices used in magic and ritual, and a founder of what has become the richest private museum of folk and tantric art in India. Though initially unassuming, his paintings are serious, sensual, even interrogative; from a Western standpoint, they are successful, spare abstractions (loosely akin to Klee's or Kandinsky's) in which chance operations produce subtle details of stroke and texture. They also read as mandala-like tools for honing mental capacities and sensory awareness, for investigating habits of one's own thinking to the point at which they might shatter against the complexity of reality.

The twenty-seven graceful sigils (all works untitled) in this recent exhibition each invite interpretation and reward scrutiny while remaining largely elusive. In one of them, dark gray shapes combine to suggest, alternately, an eerie floating alien, the cross-section of a chromosome, or a dancer twirling amid smoke; the image's murkiness lends it a sense of dimensionality. In a 1989 work, a brown homuncular form seems almost like a stain or scorch mark, an impression bolstered by the fact that Vyakul used the inside of an old book cover as his canvas. The figure's milky white eye appears to be oozing from its head. Whether or not the artist is suggesting the strange or

dangerous aspects of the intellect is an ambiguity that enriches an appreciation of the work without being essential to it. A painting from 1999 features five ovoid figures, each with a differently colored core, arranged roughly like a baseball diamond (complete with pitcher's mound). Two of the outer circles are flushed pink, the other two dark rust. The larger center form is a fuss of aqua with a sienna center that echoes the nimbus around all five. Altogether the image suggests a primitive diagram of planets orbiting a stormy sun, or even our own roiling consciousness. The distance between these associations is spanned subconsciously, yet to moving, even profound effect.

These works are explorations, at once quixotic and mature, reserved and tenderly expressive, of some dream realm that has a lot to do with how we experience our world. Vyakul seems to have invoked this realm ritualistically, making almost arbitrary geometric strokes with brush or fingers in paint mixed with finely ground stones, clay, charcoal, flowers and plants, powders, lipstick, and coffee. The Rorschach-esque quality of Vyakul's works bespeaks the importance of what the viewer brings to them, and they are enlivened with dichotomies inherent to mysticism: asceticism and sensuality, hermeticism and the explicit, contemplation and action. For Vyakul, opposites were complementary, and the balance he struck between them in his art was meticulously maintained. The drama his quiet calligraphs seem to enact is archetypal; he stayed just inside that boundary across which the abstract passes fatally into the figurative, enabling his elementary forms to conjure a fleeting yet evocative world of memory, dream, and experience.

—Tom Breidenbach



Acharaya Vyakul, untitled, 1989, mixed media on found paper, 10 1/2 x 8 1/2".